

Scoping
Information

Fire and Fuels Management Plan Amendment/ Environmental Assessment

May 2003



**United States Department of Interior
Bureau of Land Management
New Mexico State Office
PO Box 27115
Santa Fe, NM 87502-0115**

Information Package

Fire and Fuels Management Plan Amendment/ Environmental Assessment

Background

- ✓ Over 7.2 million acres of the western US burned, at a cost of \$2 billion, in 2000.
- ✓ During the past five years, some 105,000 acres of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands have burned in New Mexico.

Proposed Action Summary

The proposed action would establish fire management direction for the Bureau of Land Management lands in New Mexico and Texas. This guidance would serve as the basis for the development of future Fire Management Plans.

Wildland fires would be managed based on issues and constraints identified through the planning process. Results of the proposed action would be more prescribed fires and fuel reduction treatments (such as thinning) than have occurred in the past.

Short-term goals are to reduce hazardous fuels through various treatment methods (i.e., mechanical, chemical, and prescribed fire), and re-introduce fire into the ecosystem. Long-term goals are to allow fire to resume a more natural ecological role on the BLM lands, reduce fire suppression costs, reduce acres damaged by severe wildfires, and increase public safety from wildfires.

Proposed Action

The proposed Resource Management Plan (RMP) amendment includes **two key components**:

- 1) the delineation of fire management units, and
- 2) the identification of broad fuel treatments, including prescribed fire.

Delineation of Fire Management Units

The first component of the Proposed Action is the delineation of fire management units. Public lands would be placed into one of four fire management categories:

A - Areas where fire is not desired at all.

This category includes areas where fire suppression is required to prevent direct threats to life or property. It also includes areas where fire never played a large role, historically, in the development and maintenance of the ecosystem. Emphasis is on fire prevention, detection, and rapid suppression response and techniques. Non-fire fuel treatments (such as thinning) are employed.

B - Areas where unplanned wildfire is not desired because of current conditions.

These are ecosystems (including some urban-interface areas) where an unplanned fire could have negative effects unless or until some form of suppression takes place. Suppression is the objective for unplanned wildfire. Non-fire fuels treatments are primarily used to reduce the hazardous effects of unplanned wildfire, but prescribed fire would not be ruled out as a tool.

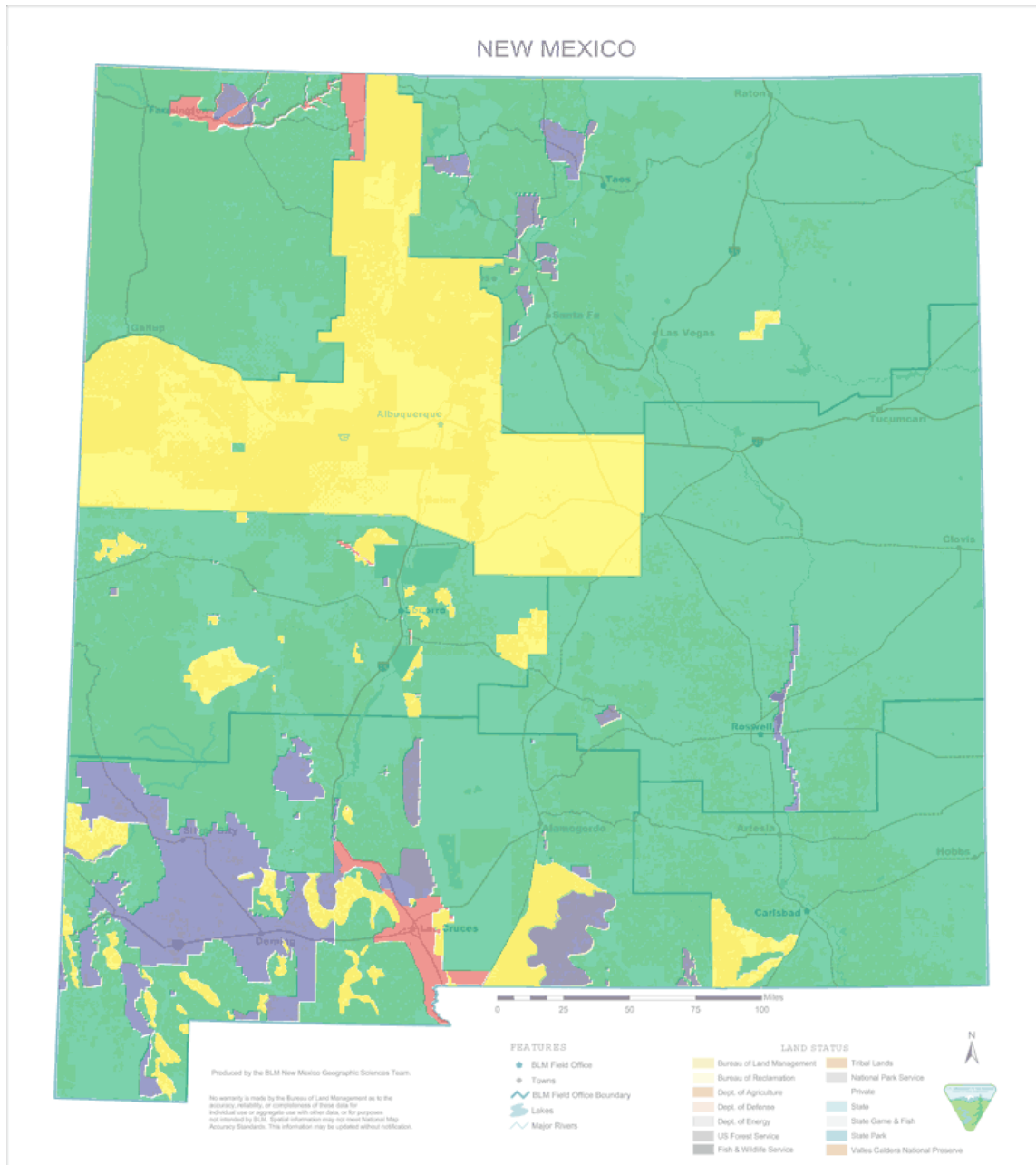
C - Areas where wildland fire is desired, but there are significant constraints that must be considered for its use.

This category includes areas where wildland fire is desired, but there are significant ecological or social constraints on its use. These constraints could include air quality, threatened and endangered species, or wildlife habitat considerations. Fire and non-fire fuels treatments may be utilized to reduce any hazardous effects of unplanned wildfire.

D - Areas where wildland fire is desired, and there are few or no constraints for its use.

This category includes areas where wildland fire is desired, and there are few or no constraints on using it. These areas offer the greatest opportunity to take advantage of the full range of wildfire management options available under the appropriate management response. Fewer fuel treatments are anticipated in this category; however, both fire and non-fire tools may be used.

The existing fire management units (A – D) in New Mexico are shown below. All the BLM surface lands in Texas are in FMU category c. See web site at www.nm.blm.gov for more detail.



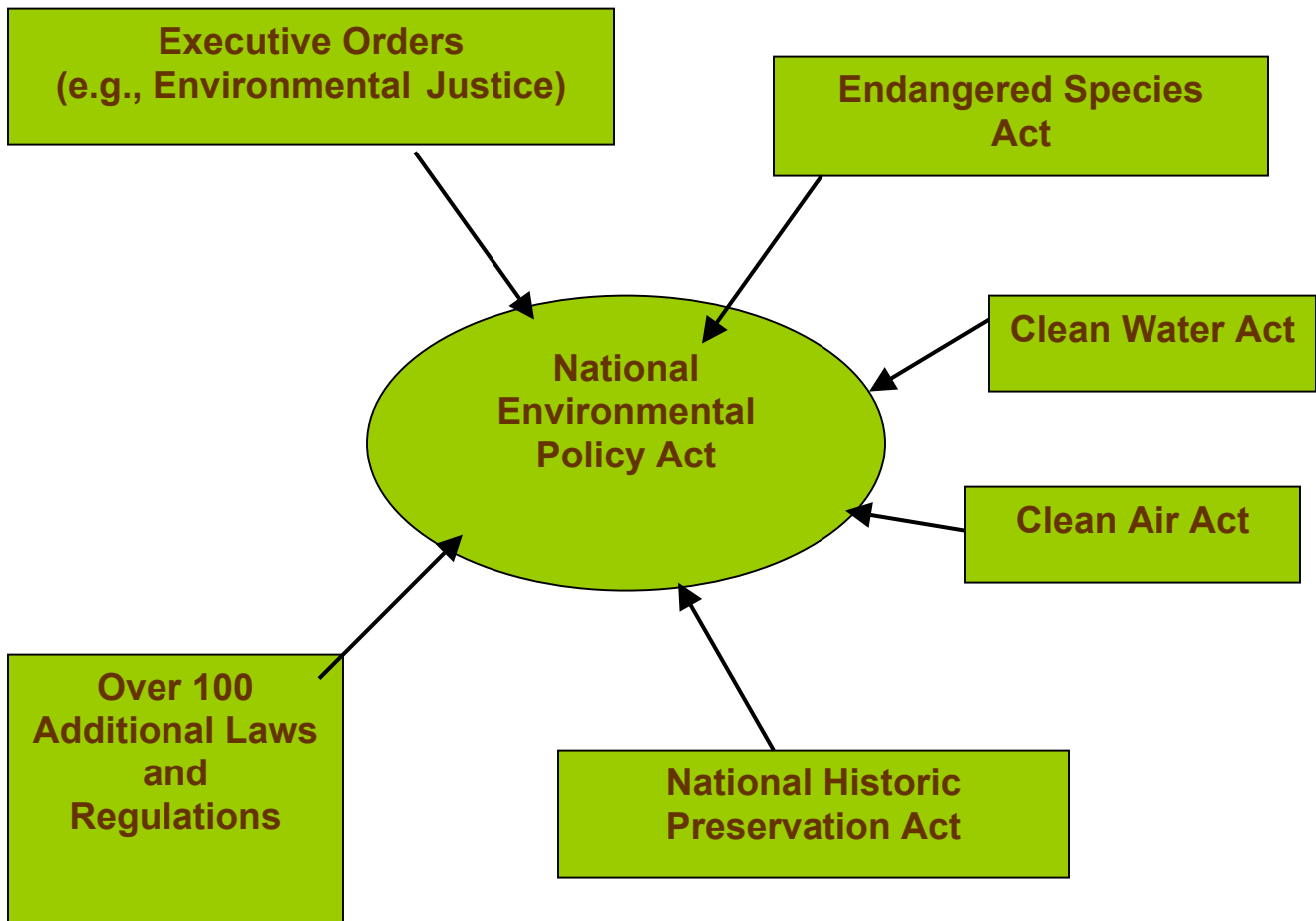
Key: Red – category a; Violet – category b; Green – category c; Yellow – category d. Please see our web site at www.nm.blm.gov for more detailed maps of each Field Office. All surface lands in the Amarillo Field Office are in category c.

No Action

There is also a “No Action” Alternative which would continue fire management in the nine Resource Management Plans (RMPs) as the status quo. Existing RMPs contain little fire management direction. Fire management units are not delineated in existing RMPs. Existing RMPs do not comply with the updated Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy.

Pertinent Laws

- Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976
- National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA)
NEPA is the umbrella act for over 100 Federal laws and regulations.



Identification of Broad Fuel Treatments, Including Prescribed Fire

The proposed action includes some or all of the following fuel treatments:

- ✓ **Prescribed Fire**
- ✓ **Mechanical Thinning/Seeding**
- ✓ **Chemical Treatment**
- ✓ **Wildland Fire for Resource Benefit**

The projected treatment levels are expected to represent a sizeable increase over past treatment levels implemented under the existing RMPs.

Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action

Wildfires in New Mexico have increased in both size and number at an unprecedented rate during the last decade. Land management practices, including fire suppression, have changed many fire-dependent ecosystems in New Mexico and west Texas. Many of New Mexico's woodlands and forests are now overstocked with small diameter trees, which result in significantly increased fuel loads. Fire, which plays an integral role in Southwest ecosystems, is now prone to become catastrophic because of this fuel build-up.

When initially written, existing RMPs did not anticipate the magnitude of wildfire impacts, or the fuels and prescribed fire treatments necessary to resolve them. The purpose of the proposed Plan Amendment is to address these changes, evaluate the impacts at the landscape level, and chart a course of action to bring the ecosystems more in balance with their natural potentials.

The proposed action is needed to reduce risks to public and firefighter safety by: reducing the need for repeated fire fighting efforts in the same localities, reducing the risk of wildland fires to urban/rural areas, and reducing fire occurrence in these areas.

The 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy (updated in 2001) requires the proposed amendment. The current RMPs contain minimal fire management direction. Until the 1995 Federal Fire Policy, the role of fire was not viewed as an essential part of ecosystems. The Federal Fire Policy now requires the integration of fire management into the land use planning process.

Preliminary Planning Issues

The BLM has identified several preliminary issues. Preliminary issues were described in the Notice of Intent to Prepare a Fire and Fuels Management Plan Amendment, which was published in the Federal Register on May 7. These issues include:

- Protection of human life
- Protection of property
- Protection of natural/cultural resources
- Integration of fire and resource management
- Protection of air quality

We hope that the upcoming scoping meetings and other comment opportunities will lead to the identification of additional issues and provide us with a broader perspective.

Planning Process

The overall planning process will include the preparation of an Environmental Assessment (EA). The proposed action would result in the amendment of all nine RMPs in New Mexico and Texas. The EA will incorporate public and agency comments received throughout the analysis process. Preparation of the Plan Amendment/EA is expected to take place over an 18-month period which began in May 2003.

Project milestones include:

- | | |
|--|----------------|
| ▪ Begin Scoping | May 2003 |
| ▪ Hold Public Scoping Meetings | May-June 2003 |
| ▪ Identify Issues/Develop Alternatives | September 2003 |
| ▪ Distribute Plan Amendment/EA | June 2004 |
| ▪ Protest Period | July 2004 |
| ▪ Sign Decision Record | September 2004 |

How You Can Be Involved in the Planning Process

This is your opportunity to provide us with your comments, issues, and concerns regarding the proposed action. The BLM interdisciplinary planning team that will write the Plan Amendment/EA will review your comments. The team will revise the preliminary issues presented in this information package to more accurately reflect your concerns. Additional opportunities for public comment will be provided throughout the process.

Comments may be e-mailed to: NM_FF_Management@blm.gov

Comments may also be submitted via the comment form on the project's Internet page link at www.nm.blm.gov.

Or you may send written comments to:

Bureau of Land Management
New Mexico State Office
Attn: Signa Larralde, Project Manager
Fire and Fuels Management Plan Amendment/EA
PO Box 27115
Santa Fe, NM 87502-0115
Telephone: (505) 438-7637

Visit the project web site for information and updates at www.nm.blm.gov.

We want to ensure that we keep you informed. Please contact Signa Larralde, Project Manager, if you wish to remain on the mailing list or involved in this process. You will also be kept on the mailing list for all future correspondence if you attend one of the scoping meetings. **Your name will be removed from the project mailing list if you do not attend one of the meetings and we do not hear from you.**

PRIVACY NOTICE: If requested, a copy of all comments provided in response to this briefing package will be made available to the public including names, addresses, and any other personal information provided with the comments. Individual respondents may request confidentiality. If you wish to withhold your name or address from public review or from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your comments. All submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, will be made available for public inspection in their entirety.